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**English in Public Primary Schools in Colombia:  
Achievements and Challenges Brought about by National  
Language Education Policies**

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**Abstract:** In an effort to become more competitive in the global market, Colombia, as many other Latin American countries, has declared English the dominant foreign language to be taught in

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schools and universities across the country. To support this measure, in the last 16 years, the government, through its National Ministry of Education, has launched a series of programs such as National Program of Bilingualism 2004-2019; the Program for Strengthening the Development of Competences in Foreign Languages; The National English Program: Colombia Very Well 2015-2025; and most recently, Bilingual Colombia 2014-2018. Results from studies conducted by local researchers across the country suggest that the regulation has posed a series of challenges for public primary school teachers, which these programs have not been able to address. These challenges can be divided into two categories: professional and work related. The purpose of this article is twofold: First, the article intends to provide a critical overview of the four programs that the Colombian government has launched since 2004. Second, the article aims to present some conclusions and recommendations for language policy design and implementation in Colombia.

**Key words:** bilingualism, Colombia, English, ESL, EFL, language policy, primary education

### **El inglés en la educación primaria del sector público en Colombia: Logros y retos de las políticas lingüísticas educativas nacionales**

**Resumen:** En un esfuerzo por volverse más competitivos en el mercado global, Colombia, como muchos otros países de América Latina, ha decretado que todas las escuelas y universidades del país imparten instrucción en inglés como lengua extranjera. Para apoyar esta medida, en los últimos 16 años, el gobierno, a través del Ministerio de Educación Nacional ha lanzado una serie de programas tales como el Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo 2004-2019, el Programa de Fortalecimiento al Desarrollo de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras, el Programa Nacional de Inglés: Colombia Very Well 2015-2025, y más recientemente Colombia Bilingüe 2014-2018. Los resultados de algunos estudios llevados a cabo por investigadores locales en varios puntos del país sugieren que esta apuesta nacional ha traído consigo una serie de retos para los docentes de primaria, los cuales no han podido ser solucionados por estos programas. Estos retos pueden ser divididos en dos categorías: profesionales y de trabajo. Este artículo tiene un doble propósito: El primero, es hacer una revisión crítica de los cuatro programas que el gobierno ha lanzado desde 2004. El segundo, es presentar algunas conclusiones y recomendaciones para el diseño y la implementación de políticas lingüísticas educativas en Colombia.

**Palabras claves:** bilingüismo, Colombia, Educación Primaria, inglés, inglés como lengua extranjera, política lingüística

### **Inglês nas escolas primárias públicas na Colômbia: Conquistas e desafios trazidos pelas políticas nacionais de Educação de Línguas**

**Resumo:** Com um esforço para tornar-se mais competitiva no mercado global, a Colômbia, como muitos outros países da América Latina, declarou inglês como a língua estrangeira dominante a ser ensinada nas escolas e universidades de todo o país. Para apoiar esta medida, nos últimos 16 anos, o governo, através do Ministério Nacional da Educação, lançou uma série de programas como o Programa Nacional de Bilinguismo 2004-2019; o Programa para o Fortalecimento do desenvolvimento de Competências em Línguas Estrangeiras; O Programa Nacional de Inglês: Colômbia “Muito Bem” 2015-2025; e, mais recentemente, Colômbia Bilingual 2014-2018.

Resultados de estudos conduzidos por pesquisadores locais em todo o país sugerem que o regulamento tem emitido uma série de desafios para os professores de escolas públicas primárias, em que estes programas não têm sido capazes de resolver. Estes desafios podem ser divididos em duas categorias: profissional e trabalhos relacionados. O objetivo deste artigo é duplo: Primeiro, o artigo tem a intenção de fornecer uma visão crítica dos quatro programas que o governo Colombiano

lançou desde 2004. Segundo, este artigo tem objetivo de apresentar algumas conclusões e recomendações para a concepção de políticas de linguagem e implementação na Colômbia.  
**Palavras-chave:** bilinguismo, Colômbia, inglês como língua estrangeira, escolas primárias, professores, política da língua.

## Introduction

Colombia is located in the northwest corner of South America and is geographically, culturally and ethnically very diverse. According to Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Colombia has a population of 46.5 million people, which makes it the third most populated country in Latin America after Brazil and Mexico (OECD, 2012a). Of these, 1,378,884 individuals identify as members of indigenous groups and speak any of the 66 languages that are still alive in the country. These languages include 64 indigenous languages and two Afro-Caribbean languages that have developed since the colonial times: *Palenquero*, a Spanish-based creole spoken in San Basilio de Palenque, and an English-based creole spoken on San Andrés y Providencia Islands called Islander (González, 2008; Guerrero, 2009). Although the Colombian Constitution guarantees bilingual education and respect for these groups and their cultural identity, this is not really enforced and most schools impart instruction only in Spanish (Guerrero, 2009).

Officially, the Colombian educational system is structured into five levels: Pre-school (Pre-K and K), basic education (grades 1-9), middle education (grades 10 and 11), and higher education (NME, 1994). However, schools are divided into three types: preschools (Pre-K and K), primary schools (grades 1 to 5) and secondary schools (grades 6 to 11). The system includes public and private institutions. Public schools are attended by 85% of the population, and since 2012, are free of cost up to grade 11. Private schools are attended by 15% of the population, and are fee-paying (OECD, 2012a, p. 24).

There are significant disparities between the two types of schools. A first disparity is connected to the number of hours of instruction received each day. Some private schools work longer hours each day so that students can get additional instruction time in certain subject areas such as mathematics, science and foreign languages. In terms of the latter, for example, while in public schools students study one hour of English a week in primary school and two to three hours in secondary school (Ministerio de Educación Nacional – National Ministry of Education, 2006), in private schools exposure to this language may be quite intensive, especially in the so-called “bilingual schools,” where it is very common to have native speakers as English teachers in both primary and secondary school, and various other courses taught in English (De Mejía, Ordóñez & Fonseca, 2006).

A second disparity has to do with the number and quality of the teachers hired. While private schools recruit more and better qualified teachers due to the fact that they offer them better salaries (Álvarez, Cárdenas & González, 2011), public schools constantly suffer from shortage of both. This shortage is more evident at the primary school level where teachers who do not have an English language teaching (ELT) degree and do not know English are demanded to teach the language as part of their workload (Cárdenas, 2001). To solve these problems, the government allows state secretaries of education to hire substitute teachers, but their temporary contracts cause job instability and difficulties in the establishment of adequate relations with students, colleagues and communities (Usma, 2015).

A third disparity relates to the availability of adequate didactic and technological resources. While private schools usually have good infrastructures and enjoy a variety of material and

technological resources (Miranda & Echeverry, 2010), public schools usually lack the minimum teaching resources and good classroom conditions. Moreover, although internet access has increased in public schools in the last few years, the network bandwidth capacity is still very low and unreliable in many public schools, especially in those located in small towns and rural areas (González, 2006).

These differences in length of instruction, availability of qualified teachers, and quality of resources are reflected in the national academic exams, called *Pruebas Saber*, which students from both public and private schools have to take in grades 5, 9 and 11. In these, students from private schools usually outscore students from public schools in all subjects (OECD, 2012a). In terms of English, for example, 27% of the students in private schools reached the targeted goals, compared to 3,9% from public schools (Usma, 2015, pp. 119-120).

In spite of the higher scores obtained by students in the private sector, Colombia has not been able to significantly raise students' general academic scores in international exams. This is how in 2012, Colombian students got the lowest mean score in the three areas measured by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA): mathematics, reading, and science (OECD, 2012b). These low numbers also apply to English. According to the English Proficiency Index, which evaluates the English level of 70 countries around the world, in 2015 Colombia occupied the second to last position in South America after Venezuela, and the 57th in the world, with an overall level of too low (English First, 2015).

To improve its educational standing in the globe, in the 1990's, the NME took a series of important measures that included the issuing of *Ley General de Educación* (General Education Law) in 1994. This law mandated that schools develop speaking and reading skills in at least a foreign language since primary school (NME, 1994). Nevertheless, as Cárdenas (2001) states, these mandates were never fully implemented since, at the time, the country did not have the English teachers required to fill these positions, and the few it had were neither prepared to teach children not willing to trade the benefits they would get for teaching in private schools to teach in public primary schools.

To compensate for the English teacher shortage, in 1991, in association with the British Council, the NME built the Colombian Framework for English, most commonly known as the COFE Project. This project was the first national effort to increase the levels of English of teachers in the country. Through it, many local primary and secondary school teachers received pedagogic and linguistic training, and got access to technological resources such as the software English Discoveries. Besides, university faculty obtained support in the creation of action research projects with impact on school practices, and participated in the construction of a framework for the reform of English licensure programs (Rubiano, Frodden & Cardona, 2000). Nonetheless, as Cárdenas (2001) states, many of these actions lacked planning, quality and sustainability. Therefore, in spite of the new regulations, for ten years, in many public schools in Colombia, the teaching of English at the primary did not really begin.

Then, in 2004, as part of the *Revolución Educativa 2002-2010* (Educational Revolution), the NME designed *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo 2004-2019* (National Program of Bilingualism- NPB), a program that was supposed to modify the above-mentioned situation. In the following paragraphs, the authors describe this and other programs the Colombian government has introduced in the last twelve years, with a focus on the actions taken to raise the levels of primary school teachers and students. Next, based on documents issued by the Ministry of Education and a series of local studies, they provide an overview of the main challenges that primary school teachers have experienced throughout these programs. Finally, they present some conclusions and some implications for ELT policy design and implementation.

## Programs Launched by the Colombian Government since 2004 to Promote the Teaching and Learning of English in the Country

Since the COFE Project in the 1990s, the Colombian government has designed a series of initiatives to promote the teaching and learning of English in the country. These initiatives include the NPB, *Programa de Fortalecimiento al Desarrollo de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras* (Program for Strengthening the Development of the Competences in Foreign Languages-PSDCFL), *Programa Nacional de Inglés: Colombia Very Well* (National English Program: Colombia Very Well-NEP), and *Colombia Bilingüe 2014-2018* (Bilingual Colombia). The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of the objectives and initiatives the Colombian government outlined in each of these programs in relation to primary schools.

### The NPB

This program was based on a series of diagnostic tests that the government had applied in 2003 and 2004 to volunteer secondary school English teachers and students across the country, with the support of the British Council, which portrayed them as having a very low level of English (Cárdenas, 2006; Cely, 2007; González, 2007). Its main goal was to have, by 2019, “citizens capable of communicating in English, so that they can insert the country in universal communication processes, in the global economy, and in cultural openness, with internationally comparable standards” (NME, 2006).

To achieve these targets, the government took several measures with the support of the British Council. These measures included the revival of the mandate to provide English instruction for primary and secondary schools, and the extension of the mandate to higher education (NME, 2005). It also adopted the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as the guiding document from which teachers and students' levels of English proficiency were to be determined across the entire educational system. Additionally, in 2006, the government introduced *Guía 22: Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés* (Guide 22: Basic Competence Standards for English as a Foreign Language), putting English on the list of core areas regulated by standards.

The guide set oral, written, listening, and reading standards for each grade level, based on the CEFR framework. According to it, with only one hour of English a week in primary and two to three hours in secondary school, by 2019 all students should obtain an A1 at the end of third grade, an A2 level at the end of seventh grade, and a B1 level by the time they graduated (NME, 2006, p. 10). As for English teachers, it stipulated that by 2019, those who did not hold an English license must be 100% in B2, and those with an English license must be 100% in C1 (p. 6).

To be able to measure whether both students and teachers at all levels of the educational system had reached these targets, the NME began aligning with the CEFR the national tests for primary and secondary school students, called *Pruebas Saber*, and for university graduates, called *Pruebas Saber Pro* (Ayala & Álvarez, 2005). Still, as what happened with the General Education Law in 1994, the policy did not include the obligation for teachers to have an English teaching license to teach the subject in primary schools. Nor did it guarantee primary school teachers the professional development (PD), resources, working conditions and supporting legislation that they needed to carry out their newly assigned jobs. Instead, it supplied them with a few scattered courses, which were initially taught by the British Council, with the help of imported PD packages such as the In-service Certificate in English Language Teaching (ICELT). These courses were later assigned to local universities who tried to adapt them to local needs (González, 2007).

The PD courses were complemented with a few teaching resources and some English “immersion programs,” which simulated those carried out by the COFE project in the 1990s. During these immersion programs, primary and secondary school teachers who had a B1 or B2 level and had accepted to participate in the diagnosis exams carried out by the government in 2008 and 2009 were given the opportunity to go to cities such as San Andrés, Barranquilla y Armenia to study the language and ways to teach it (NME, 2008, 2009). Also complementing the courses were the bilingual local and regional Working Tables. They used a cascade model through which the few teachers who had been able to participate in the training, usually teachers with a B2 level of proficiency and tenure, were invited to share what they had learned with colleagues from their area and/or their institutions at the local Working Tables (Correa, Usma, & Montoya, 2014).

Initially, the teaching resources were a few Clapping Time Textbook packages provided only to the teachers who had attended the PD courses. Later, the government created a radio program called English for Colombia (ECO), and a TV program called Bunny Bonita. The latter was created with the assistance of T&T: Teaching and Tutoring College de Colombia and Faldita Films, two Colombian companies specialized in English training and audiovisual material (González, 2015b). Both had as their main objective to support students, ages 4-8, and primary school teachers with a beginning level of English, in the development of the linguistic competences required for grades 1-3. The resources were all based on the new standards for English and were supposed to respond to local contexts. They were also available online and came with accompanying videos, and other materials, such as with flashcards, posters, workbooks, and a teachers’ guide, which could be downloaded as pdfs (NME, 2012a).

Finally, to assist teachers who were still in preparation, the government put forward the Proyecto para el Fortalecimiento de Programas de Licenciatura en Lenguas: Inglés (the Project for the Strengthening of English Teacher Preparation Programs), in conjunction with the British Council. According to the NPB Director at the time, its aim was to help English teacher preparation programs across the country “diagnose and improve” their English teacher preparation programs (Cely, 2009). The project used the Quick Placement Test (QPT) published by Oxford University Press to measure students and teachers’ knowledge of English, and the Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT), designed by the University of Cambridge to measure their knowledge of English teaching methods. Based on these tests and on interviews with stakeholders, class observations, focus groups and questionnaires, it formulated some improvement actions for the teacher preparation programs (NME & British Council, n.d.). Although, in the beginning, the project received a lot of skepticism from faculty working in the English teaching preparation programs of many universities, according to NME, by 2013, 74% of the universities had accepted to participate in this project (NME, 2013).

As is evident from the description above, the NPB introduced many changes in regards to the teaching of English in schools in Colombia some of which were needed (e.g., PD for English teachers, standards for the teaching of English, alignment of instruction and materials to tests, and acquisition of materials with which to work). Unfortunately, as Colombian scholars at the time noted, the program suffered from a series of flaws. First, it was based on a series of tests that were not valid since they measured either content or methodological knowledge of teachers, leaving aside all the other aspects that are involved in teaching a foreign language, such as a well-developed curriculum, appropriate methodologies, and sufficient resources (Cárdenas, 2006). On the other hand, the tests were used by the government to blame school teachers for the lack of proficiency of students when a great number of them, namely primary school teachers, had not been prepared or hired to do this job or been provided with the necessary conditions to do their new job well (Sánchez & Obando, 2008).

In addition, the program used a top down approach in which the main stakeholders, i.e., English school teachers and English teacher educators, were treated as mere technicians whose job it was to implement the measures that the government, with the collaboration of international corporations, had thought out for them (Guerrero, 2010a). Indeed, as Usma (2009) noticed, these stakeholders were left out of the important decisions regarding the program and replaced by transnational organizations such as the British Council and Cambridge University Press.

Moreover, as Bonilla & Tejada-Sánchez (2016) stated, the program “enshrined English as a symbol of prestige” over other foreign languages such as French, German, Italian and Portuguese, which had a significant presence in university curricula, and over the 66 native and Afro-Caribbean languages that existed in the country and were spoken by *Palenqueros*, Islanders, and indigenous communities (p. 186). Finally, the program used standards, materials, PD models, and tests produced elsewhere by international corporations such as the British council, Cambridge University Press, and Oxford University Press. As such, these did not reflect the reality and conditions under which most public school teachers worked or the level of English of most primary school teachers. What is more, they assigned a high value to the knowledge produced in Europe and undervalued local knowledge and expertise, perpetuating the inequities between local knowledge and knowledge of the former colonial powers (Guerrero, 2010a).

Although in the last few years of the NPB, the government hired national experts to produce the textbooks that would be used in public schools, gathered the support of some universities for the design and piloting of these materials, and involved school teachers in their creation, it continued to marginalize teachers and teacher educators from the important decisions (González, 2015b). Indeed, as will be evident in the following sections, these stakeholders were only called on to either validate or implement what the policy makers with the help of international organizations had thought out for them. They were not invited to participate in the decision-making process or to voice their opinions about the measures that were going to be taken.

## The PSDCFL

In 2012, due to critiques made by Colombian scholars about the program’s name (Correa & Usma, 2013; González, 2007; Guerrero, 2008) and its outright disregard for the bilingualism that already existed among *Palenqueros*, Islanders, and indigenous communities (Guerrero 2009), the NPB changed its name to PSDCFL, a title which omitted the word “bilingual” and introduced the words “foreign language.” Although no measure was taken by the government to promote other foreign languages apart from English, as the new title would suggest, the act was well regarded by the academic community. Certainly, they considered it a small step towards recognizing that about 3.3% of the Colombian population was already bilingual in Spanish and other indigenous or afro-Caribbean languages, and that English in the country still had the status of a foreign language.

Apart from the change in name, in this program the government also shifted the proposed English proficiency levels for students and teachers. In the case of students, the government only indicated target levels of proficiency for grade 11, not every grade, and switched the target year from 2019 to 2014, indicating that at least 40% of students should be in level B1 by this year. As for teachers, the government also made some adjustments. While for non-licensed English teachers it maintained its target of 100% in B2, for English licensed teachers it lowered the target of 100% to 80% and the C1 level to B2 by 2014 (NME, 2012b, p.11).

To promote the achievement of these targets, the government took several new measures. First, it issued Ley 1651 of 2013, otherwise called *Ley de Bilingüismo* (Bilingualism Law). This law modified some of the articles of the General Education Law of 1994 such as articles 8, 20, 21, 22,

30. As far as primary education is concerned, these modifications can be summarized in two points: (a) mandating that all skills, not just speaking and reading, be developed from the first years of school (Articles 20 & 21), through middle (Article 30), and secondary school (Article 22), and (b) specifying that the foreign language to be taught in public school should be English (Article 8) (NME, 2013b).

Additionally, the NME added new resources for primary school teachers such as MY ABC English kit, a package which included a teachers' guide, a resource booklet, lesson plans, posters, flash cards, audio CDs, and CDs with all of the materials needed for a class (NME, 2014a). Finally, for the first time in the history of the programs, it included in its rhetoric three important aspects: (a) the formulation of alliances with the private sector, the academic sector, and other government sectors; (b) the need to connect the government English goals to municipal and state government plans (p.18); and (c) the urgency of developing mechanisms through which it could do a continuous follow up and evaluation of the PSDCFL projects (NME, 2013a, p. 27).

As can be gathered from the information presented above, the PSDCFL did not constitute a significant diversion from what had been proposed by NPB. First, in spite of the change in name, the program did not bring about a switch in focus from merely English to other foreign languages with a high standing and demand in the country such as French, Portuguese and Mandarin (De Mejia, 2006). Nor did it cause the promotion of other indigenous or Afro-Caribbean languages or the recognition of people who spoke these languages as bilingual.

Second, the change in proficiency levels was not backed by changes in the tests used, an increase in the validity of these tests, or the incorporation of other various instruments that could account for all of the aspects involved in teaching a foreign language. Similarly, the launching of the Bilingualism Law, with its promotion of speaking, reading, writing and listening from primary school, was not followed by other actions that would allow these skills to be developed. Such actions could have included an extension in the number of hours of English instruction a week, the hiring for primary schools of English teachers prepared to teach those skills, or the acquisition of sufficient well-designed material and technological resources to promote these skills, to mention just a few of the elements needed to achieve the goal.

Third, the change of rhetoric was not accompanied by practical actions that would allow the new allies such as universities, for example, to have a real voice or participation in the decisions that were being made (González, 2015b). In fact, the law was something that universities learned about only a few days before it was passed and which they never had the chance to contest or modify. Nor was the new policy discourse useful in gathering the financial and legislative support of other ministries (e.g., the Ministry of Finance, of Housing, or of Public Health), which could commit to an improvement of the socio-economic and socio-political conditions affecting the neighborhoods in which public schools are located.

Fourth, the proposal to follow up and evaluate the programs was not succeeded by an actual revision of local foreign language needs and how these matched national goals. Additionally, as pointed out by Correa and Usma (2013), it was not matched by the launching of a solid accountability systems in which the PD programs that were being implemented, for example, could be assessed according to criteria that went beyond how many teachers or students participated and which were the entrance and exit levels of proficiency.

Finally, although under this program the government added new material resources, as state by González (2007) and Usma (2009), it persisted in its effort to marketize, standardize, and homogenize English language teaching. Surely, it continued to assign the production of these materials to big corporations, to make the contents of these materials fit some decontextualized

standards, and to buy the same materials for all students, regardless of their location, culture, and native language.

## The NEP

Not two years had passed since the presentation of the PSDCFL in 2012 when the government introduced the National English Program: Colombia Very Well 2015-2025: Colombia Very Well, in 2014. This program was supposed to provide a new dimension to the components of the PSDCFL with larger interventions and higher investment (NME, 2014a). According to government leaders, the program was the sub-product of a 2013 revision of the achievements of these programs conducted by experts from NME and the consulting firm McKinsey & Company (NME, 2014a).

As the previous programs, this program intended to raise the level of English of Colombian citizens (NME, 2014a, p. 4). However, it was different from the other programs in several respects: First, it had a clearer focus on English that was evident in the program's name and the wording of its objectives. Second, it clearly acknowledged that its ultimate goal was to be invited into OECD and to improve the PISA scores for Colombians (NME, 2014b). Third, it actually gathered the support of the other government ministries and of the private sector, who according to the government, "were willing to bet on the development of English competences in the country" (NME, 2014a, p. 4).

Finally, and most importantly, it shifted its target school population. Indeed, when in previous years the government had put most of its efforts in developing the English proficiency of primary school teachers, this time the government decided to concentrate on grades 9-11. According to the PDF presentation of the program, such decision was based on the experiences of countries which had supposedly obtained better results in raising the English proficiency levels of students when they had begun to strengthen English from the last grades. Among these countries were China, Japan, Malaysia, Germany, Norway and Chile (NME, 2014a, pp. 50, 52).

To accomplish these objectives, as the previous programs, the NEP readjusted its English proficiency targets for students and teachers. For students in grade 11, for example, it maintained its target of B1 but raised the percentage of students who should reach this level from 40 to 50%, even though it had extended the deadline to 2025. For teachers it did something similar: it maintained the target in B2 but lower the percentage of teachers who should reach this level to 85% and extended the year to 2018. According to the NME, the change was done based on experiences acquired in other countries such as Malaysia, where it was proven that "this expectation was more down to earth" (NME, 2014a, p. 57).

Additionally, the NEP proposed a host of new initiatives. Among the most important of these was the increase from one to three in the number of English hours a week received by primary school students (NME, 2014a, p. 66), and the extension of school hours from six to eight hours a day (NME, 2014b). None of the two parts of this initiative seems to have taken off so far. Nevertheless, the second part is being piloted in some schools in Antioquia this year. These schools have moved from receiving a group of students in the morning and another in the afternoon, to receiving only one group for longer hours.

A second far-reaching action taken by the NEP was the creation of the so-called Lineamientos de Calidad para las Licenciaturas en Educación (Quality Guidelines for Teacher Preparation Programs) (NME, 2014b). According to these, the foreign language that all teacher preparation programs should develop or ask students to certify was English, and the level of English achieved by students in these programs should be a B1 in the CEFR. With this regulation, the

government intended to provide a solution to the lack of proficiency in English of most primary school teachers. However, as will be seen in the Main Challenges for Primary School Teachers section, with these guidelines, the government disregarded the fact that a big percentage of primary school teachers did not have a B.A. Moreover, it did not take into account the opposition this regulation would have in most teacher preparation programs, where faculty have indicated that they do not consider these objectives reachable or even justifiable since they are not preparing teachers to teach this subject.

A third important action that has carried on into Bilingual Colombia is the Programa de Formadores Nativos Extranjeros (the Foreign Native Speaker Instructors Program, officially called the English Teaching Fellowship Program) (Heart for Change, 2016). This program, built by NME in partnership with the Heart for Change Foundation, intended to bring native English speakers from different parts of the world to Colombia to work with Colombian public school English teachers. However, consistent with its new goal of targeting the last grades of school first and working its way down, these volunteers have been placed in secondary schools (NME, 2014a, p. 67). Finally, in terms of resources, the NEP also proposed a bold new initiative. It hired Open University, from England, to provide methodological support via web for both primary and secondary school teachers, with chat rooms for consulting, tutoring available via phone, and model lessons via web or CDs (NME, 2014a, p. 77).

If well, with this program, the government tried to make some structural changes in schools (e.g., extending the number of hours studied each day and the number of hours of English a week), as with the other programs, these regulations were not supported by pertinent actions. These actions could have included the building of more schools that could host the students who were left out in the switch from two to only one schedule, and the hiring of permanent English primary school teachers who could offer the two additional hours of English a week. They could have also incorporated the splitting of English classes into smaller groups so that students could have real interactions with their teachers and peers, or the improvement of the poor socioeconomic conditions affecting the lives of most students and preventing them from focusing on their education.

Instead, in a symbolic act of defeat in regards to the development of English proficiency since primary school, and in outright contradiction with measures taken by the previous program, such as the Bilingualism Law, the structural changes were followed by a series of inadequate measures. These measures left primary schools abandoned to their destiny without any indication as to how to accomplish new English proficiency goals without the PD programs, the materials, and all the perks that they had been promised. Similarly, licensure programs were left to figure out on their own how to accomplish the same goals without modifying the number of credits in their programs, hiring more English faculty, or forgetting other languages students might need based on the subject matter they were studying and the jobs they were likely to perform upon graduation. Consequently, these last measures, as many previous ones, were not really observed by the parties involved.

As for other changes brought about by this program, such as the methodological support via web, several questions remain. These questions include, how much of this support is really being provided to primary school teachers who are not the priority of the government any more, especially those in rural areas of the country? How much is staying on paper? How effective has this methodological support been for the primary school teachers who have used it?

## Bilingual Colombia

As if two programs in two years had not been enough, on the same year that the NEP was conceived, the government announced its most recent program: Bilingual Colombia 2014-2018. The program has as its main goal “to get students to improve their communication skills in English so that they could access to better job and professional opportunities” (NME, 2016). Specifically, the program aims to raise the percentage of students in B1 from 2% to 8% by 2018, and to raise the percentage of students in A2 from 7% to 35%. As for teachers, it intends to get those who have an A1 or A2 English level of proficiency to improve 1 or 2 points in the CEFR (NME, 2016).

To achieve these goals, the government has devised various plans. Among these, probably the most noticeable, and the reasons for which are still unclear, is the plan to narrow the scope of the program to only 32 secretaries of education, and 145 schools across the country (NME, 2016). A second plan is to diagnose the level of English of 100% of the teachers, since up to 2013 only 50% had been diagnosed. A third plan is to hire 1,400 teachers in level B2 in temporary jobs for 3 years to tackle the shortage of teachers both in primary and secondary schools (NME, 2016). Although the government does not specify whether they want to diagnose the level of primary or secondary school teachers, and at what level the temporary teachers hired are going to be working, new policies suggest these new goals only apply to secondary school English teachers.

As for resources and PD programs, consistent with its aims of focusing primarily on the students' from grades 9 to 11, most of the new curriculum plans, textbooks, and didactic materials that were developed by the government with the collaboration of the British Council and other local and international partners, were for grades 9 to 11. Similarly, most of the current PD plans, namely the Foreign Native Speaker Instructors Program and the Incentives Program for Teachers, are focused on secondary school teachers. Indeed, as explained above, the native speakers that are now being hired by the government through Heart for Change are working with secondary, not primary school teachers. On the other hand, even though both primary and secondary school teachers are invited to participate in the English immersions that make up the Incentives Program, these programs are not really accessible to primary school teachers. The reason for this is that one of the requirements to participate is to have a degree in foreign language teaching (NME, 2015), which most of them do not have.

As is clear in this description of the program, with Bilingual Colombia, the government has gone full cycle in several respects. First, in outright disregard for all the evidence that suggests that there is already bilingualism in the country, not precisely of Spanish-English but of Spanish and indigenous or Afro-Caribbean languages (Guerrero, 2009), the government has gone back to its objective of promoting bilingualism of Spanish English. Second, in spite of having issued two laws in the last 22 years, the General Law of Education (1994) and the Bilingualism Law (2013), which mandate the teaching of a foreign language from primary school, the NME has gone back to channeling all of its efforts to the promotion of English in secondary schools. Third, as if a low score in these tests could prove that it is the teachers' fault that students do not have good English scores in *Pruebas Saber*, the government has returned to its initial plan of diagnosing teachers and students' proficiency levels. Finally, it has provided a new strength to English immersion programs and used these as incentives for teachers. The only two differences here are that: (a) this time the immersions are not being offered as incentives for school teachers to take the English proficiency tests but to take the PD courses offered, and (b) this time the immersions are not really accessible to primary school teachers since most of them do not have the appropriate degree.

Not surprisingly, then, 12 years after the launching of the NPB, in regards to the teaching of English, public primary school teachers continue to face almost the same challenges that they faced when the programs first started. These challenges are described below.

## Main Challenges for Primary School Teachers

In trying to comply with government goals and regulations regarding the teaching and learning of English in public primary schools, teachers have encountered many challenges that range from professional to work-related. The following paragraphs describe these challenges.

### Professional Challenges

These challenges refer to the difficulties primary school teachers experience even before they come into their classrooms. They comprise teachers' lack of preparation to teach the language, and poor design of the initiatives laid out by the NME to provide this preparation; namely, the PD programs.

**Lack of enough teachers prepared to teach English in primary schools.** This is probably the most pressing and enduring challenge public primary schools have had to deal with since the issuing of the General Law of education in 1994. Indeed, in a landmark article written by Cárdenas (2001), based on a series of surveys conducted in the cities of Cali and Popayán between 1995 and 1999, Cárdenas discussed how English licensed teachers were being absorbed mostly by private institutions. These institutions hired them to teach at both primary and secondary school levels, in spite of the fact that, as part of their teaching preparation, they had received very little specific training on how to teach English to children. Consequently, in spite of the mandate, by 2001, in most regions of the country, public schools had not yet begun teaching English or any other language at this level. Besides, schools that had begun had put this task in the hands of homeroom teachers with licenses to teach general subjects, not English.

A similar situation was found a few years later in the study conducted between 2003 and 2004 by Cadavid, McNulty & Quinchía (2004) in private and public primary schools in Medellín, the second most populated city in the country after Bogotá. Of the 12 primary school teachers participating in their study, only three had degrees in foreign languages. However, as Cadavid et al. (2004) stated, they "neither possessed knowledge about pedagogical principles and procedures in teaching children nor had the background in child language development, or experience in teaching groups of children" (Cadavid et al., 2004, p. 40).

Later, in studies conducted between 2008-2011 in the state of Antioquia, and the cities of Medellín and Pasto about the impact of the NPB, researchers found that the teaching of English in primary schools continued to be assigned to primary school teachers who did not have the necessary qualifications. This was partly because of the government denial to allow secretaries of education to hire certified English teachers for public primary schools.

Indeed, in the study conducted in the state of Antioquia, González and Montoya (2010) found that even though the Colombian legislation demands at least an undergraduate university degree to be part of the teaching force in the public sector, in the primary schools that they visited this was not true. In these institutions, at least 10% of the teachers held academic degrees from normal schools or two-year colleges. This number was significantly higher in the study conducted by Cárdenas and Chaves (2010) in the city of Cali, the third most populated city in the country, and by Bastidas and Muñoz-Ibarra in the smaller city of Pasto. In Cali, researchers found that 24% of their

participants from public primary schools had studied in Normal Schools while only 7% of the participants working in private schools had that type of academic training. In Pasto, the same percentage of primary school teachers (24%) reported not having a B.A. (Bastidas & Muñoz-Ibarra, 2011).

As for those teachers who had a B.A., in the study conducted by González and Montoya (2010) in the state of Antioquia, only 14% (11 out of 79) of the participating primary school teachers had a teaching degree in English. The rest of the teachers had degrees in primary education, pre-school and Spanish and literature. These numbers are significantly higher than those obtained by González (2015a) in the Metropolitan area of Medellín, and by Bastidas and Muñoz-Ibarra in Pasto. In the study in Medellín, researchers found that of all the primary school teachers, only 1 teacher (5%) had a university-based teaching degree in English, and 20 (95%) had pursued teacher education programs in other areas such as pre-school education, primary education, Spanish or Social studies, among others. In the study in Pasto, researchers found that 47% of the primary school teachers had a B.A. in languages, and 29% in other fields of study (Bastidas & Muñoz-Ibarra, 2011)

Although a graduate degree is not required to become an primary school teacher, it is interesting to note that none of the primary school participants in the Antioquia study had a master's degree in English or any other areas (González & Montoya, 2010). However, 30% had a one-year graduate degree, called *especialización* (specialization), in areas such as educational administration and ICT's, not in ELT. In Medellín metropolitan area and in Cali, the numbers seem to be even inferior to those in Antioquia. In the study conducted by González (2015a), only one primary school teacher reported holding a specialization in ELT. None of them had a master's degree either. In the study carried out by Cárdenas and Chaves (2010) in Cali, only 9% of all public school teachers had a specialization in languages and no one had a master's degree.

The situation in Antioquia and Medellín contrasts with that in Pasto. In this city, the number of primary school teachers with graduate degrees seemed to be much higher since 58% of the teachers participating in the Bastidas and Muñoz-Ibarra's (2011) study affirmed they had a "postgraduate diploma" in areas such as creative pedagogy, educational administration, literature, human resources and sex education. The difference in statistics may be due to the fact that while the teachers in the Antioquia and Medellín studies were asked specifically about master's or specialization degrees, the teachers in the Pasto study were asked about postgraduate diplomas, which may include specialization or short term courses taken after the undergraduate degree was obtained.

As can be seen, the problem of lack of enough teachers prepared to teach English in primary schools in Colombia is ancient and its solution is not in sight. This is because the Colombian government has refused to address its main causes: (a) that the few English teachers that are coming out into the market prefer to go into universities or private schools since these provide more attractive packages that incorporate better salaries, more incentives, better access to resources, and more motivated students than the public schools (Álvarez et al., 2011); and (b) that the government itself does not allow secretaries of education to hire English licensed teachers for primary schools (Usma, 2015, p. 100). Unless the causes for the shortage of prepared English teachers for public primary education are addressed, government plans to improve English education at this level once it has done it at the secondary level are going to be truncated once again.

**Poor design of PD programs.** This problem also carries on from the 1990s when the General Law of Education was passed. Indeed, in the documental study conducted by Cárdenas (2001), she found that the opportunities for primary teachers to learn the language or how to teach it were either non-existent or sporadic and mostly in the hands of editorial houses. On the

other hand, teachers who had been able to participate in PD programs found that these lacked sufficient planning, quality and sustainability.

A review of studies conducted in urban and rural areas in Colombia suggests that 15 years later, the PD programs provided to primary school teachers have not significantly improved. Indeed, according to statistics provided by the national government during the presentation of the NEP in 2014, by 2012 a third of the 94 secretaries of education in the country, still had not devised any PD programs, and those that did have them, considerably reduced their number between 2010 and 2012 (NME, 2014a, p. 17). Moreover, as reported by the authors of studies conducted in both the city of Cali and the state of Antioquia, these programs suffered from many flaws which can be attributed to lack of good planning, quality, and sustainability. Among these flaws are lack of coverage, disarticulation and discontinuity, and inappropriate contents, whose characteristics are described below.

**Lack of coverage.** This refers to the lack of opportunities for primary school teachers to attend the PD courses and was found in the studies conducted in Antioquia, Medellín, Cali and the rural areas of Colombia. In the study conducted by faculty from Universidad de Antioquia with 97 primary and 83 secondary school English teachers working in 36 public school spread around the state of Antioquia, most primary school teachers reported not having been able to take the PD courses because the government prioritized the PD of normal school teachers and licensed English teachers. Additionally, tenured teachers got priority over substitute teachers, and those many years away from retirement got preference over those who were five years short of it (Correa et al., 2014).

Similarly, in the study conducted by faculty from Universidad del Valle with 220 primary school teachers from 51 public and private schools in the urban area, teachers noted that the PD courses were often available only to secondary school teachers (Cárdenas & Chaves, 2013). Finally, in the study conducted in rural areas of Colombia, primary school teachers claimed not to have been able to attend seminars, conferences, or formal training, as their city counterparts (Bonilla & Cruz-Arcila, 2014).

The information provided by teachers in these three studies coincides with statistics obtained by Álvarez et al. (2011) in the study they conducted in 31 universities between 2004 and 2009 about PD programs in the country. In this study, the authors found that most of the investment in PD went to secondary schools, with 81 to 82 % of the resources being funneled to this level, and 54 to 55% being funneled to primary schools (p. 14). In addition, most of this investment and coverage were centered on urban not rural schools, which left teachers from rural areas at a terrible disadvantage with respect to the first group (p. 15).

**Disarticulation and Discontinuity.** These aspects were found in the studies conducted in public schools in the state of Antioquia. In terms of the first aspect, interviewed English teachers noticed that the disarticulation was caused by secretaries of education since these assigned the PD programs to certain universities, depending on the alliances built by the political party that was in charge of the municipal administration. Then, four years later, when the administration changed, they assigned the programs to a different teacher trainer provider, which had its own agenda. In regards to the second aspect, teachers denounced that the discontinuities were also caused by the secretaries of education, which gave priority to those teachers who had not attended the PD courses even once. Hence, both primary and secondary public school teachers who wanted to take various courses to develop their linguistic or pedagogic knowledge found very few opportunities to do so (Correa et al., 2014).

Discontinuity of the PD programs offered by the secretaries of education was also found in the study conducted by Álvarez et al. (2011) in 31 universities and 14 secretaries of education around

the country. According to the participants in this study, the PD programs were characterized by long periods of inactivity, which stemmed mostly from administrative problems inside the secretaries of education and a view of coverage as more important than continuity. Such discontinuity generated lack of motivation in teachers and high dropout rates (Álvarez et al. 2011, p. 17).

**Inappropriate Content.** This issue was only reported in the study conducted by Correa et al. (2014) in the state of Antioquia. Nonetheless, it has been discussed extensively in the Colombian Language Policy literature. In the Correa et al.'s (2014) study, teachers noted that the contents of the PD courses they had taken had been very repetitive probably due to the above-mentioned disarticulation and discontinuity of these programs. Besides, they were more suitable for English licensed secondary school teachers than for them since they required a level of English that they did not have. Finally, they were based on standards and materials that did not account for the particularities of the contexts in which they worked, and that did not focus on the competencies that they had to develop in their students so that they could pass national exams (Correa et al., 2014).

**Heterogeneity.** This category referred to the fact that the PD courses often put together primary school teachers with no preparation in English with English licensed secondary school teachers, without taking into account that their linguistic and pedagogical needs were very different (González, Montoya, & Sierra, 2001). According to the teachers in the Correa et al.'s (2014) study in Antioquia, such heterogeneity often forced instructors to teach the courses in Spanish. Although this affected all teachers, it mostly affected English licensed teachers and those primary school teachers who had some knowledge of English since both groups felt that they were not improving their English level.

As is obvious from the statements above, the Colombian government did not really think through how it was going to face the shortage of primary school teachers required for the new task before launching its programs. Otherwise, it would have realized that the secretaries of education did not have the capacity to provide the far-reaching, well-developed, long-term continuous and articulated PD programs that both primary and secondary public school teachers needed. As it was, the secretaries of education were left to figure out all the details regarding these programs, including how they were going to pay for the PD programs, who was going to be included and excluded, and who was going to get the multimillion contracts to act as their training providers. Not being prepared for this task, the secretaries ended up investing public resources in very ineffective programs that did not really meet the needs of the participants.

## Work-Related Challenges

These challenges refer to the difficulties primary school teachers have to endure once they are in the classroom. These difficulties can be classified into four main areas: scarce physical and technological resources, large classes, insufficient time of instruction, and students' lack of motivation to learn English. The following paragraphs provide an overview of each category.

**Scarce physical and technological resources.** This has been found in most of studies conducted in both private and public schools in Colombia before the outset of the NPB (Cadavid et al., 2004; González, Montoya & Sierra, 2001 & 2002; Hernández & Faustino, 2006), and does not seem to have improved significantly since then. In the study conducted by Cadavid et al., (2004) in seven public and private primary schools in Medellín between 2003 and 2004, for example, the authors found that the materials that could be used for English teaching were insufficient, as can be seen in the following quote:

Although the schools had equipment such as televisions, VCRs and tape recorders, they lacked the video or audio tapes that could be used with this equipment.

Classroom materials such as worksheets and paper products were available but books; posters, flashcards, and games were scarce in most of these schools” (p. 42).

Teachers often had to adapt and/or create materials like flashcards, worksheets, or booklets, using their own abilities and resources (Cadavid et al., 2004, p. 43).

Similar findings were obtained in the study that Hernández & Faustino (2006) conducted in 24 public and private schools in Cali between 2003 and 2004 about the methodologies implemented by foreign language teachers. According to the authors, even though resources were apparently enough, in reality they were not due to several factors such as the high number of students per group, the few hours of English per week, and the bad state of both the equipment and the audiovisual and bilingual rooms (p. 243).

A few years later, in spite of actions presumably taken by the government to increase material and technological resources for public primary and secondary school teachers, researchers from different universities in the country found the same situation in the schools they visited in the state of Antioquia, in the city of Pasto, and in the rural areas of Colombia. In the study conducted by Correa et al. (2014) in Antioquia between 2008 and 2009, for example, teachers claimed they had very limited or no access to textbooks, flashcards, games, audio and visual recordings, worksheets, computers, labs, or English packages different from English Discoveries (Correa et al., 2014).

Summarizing these complaints, in the study conducted by Bastidas and Muñoz-Ibarra (2011) in Pasto, primary school teachers claimed their “didactic materials were nonexistent,” (p.95). Finally, in the study conducted by Bonilla and Cruz-Arcila (2014) in rural areas of Colombia, teachers reported that students “do not even have an English dictionary. There are places where English is not even taught and if this is taught, it is by using street handbooks that are full of mistakes and children learn them” (p.126). As for technological resources, they stated, “we have computers but there is no internet connection, then you have to work like when you are lacking all the resources anyways” (p. 127).

**Large classes.** In 2008, Sánchez & Obando, stated, “class size is the most evident problem in our current context” (p. 189). Studies conducted in the state of Antioquia (Correa et al., 2014) and the city of Medellín (Usma, 2015) confirm this fact. In the first, primary school teachers reported to have an average 34 students per group (Correa et al., 2014), which to them, greatly affected student learning since with that amount of students, it was impossible to develop the communicative skills the CEFR proposed. In the second, teachers reported to have 40 to 50 students per class, with no exceptions made for a subject such as English, which according to the author of the study, “requires a more personalized interaction between teacher and students, especially if this is learned as a foreign language, and the classroom is the only opportunity for students to learn and practice the foreign language” (Usma, 2015, p. 107).

**Insufficient time of instruction per week.** In 2004, when the NPB was introduced, Cadavid et al. (2004) reported how in the public and private school they visited in Medellín, classes were offered once a week for 45 minutes. According to the studies conducted by Correa et al. (2014) in Antioquia, and Usma in Medellín, five years later, this situation had not changed. In the Correa et al.’s (2014) study, for example, participating teachers stated that they taught an average of 1.3 classes a week with a class being only 40-45 minutes. This number of hours matched what the government

had stipulated for this level in the guide it published in 2006: 1 hour of English per week for primary school (NME, 2006, p. 31). Yet, it was low compared to other subjects such as Spanish, which got four to five 45-minute hours a week. Besides, many of these hours were used to carry out other activities (e.g., meetings, preparation of projects, trainings, flag salutes, and parades) or to provide reinforcement in other subjects that teachers considered more important for students, such as Spanish and math (Correa et al. 2014).

These findings are consistent with those obtained by Usma (2015) in Medellín and Bastidas and Muñoz-Ibarra (2011) in Pasto. In the first study, even though teachers report teaching English as often as two or three times a week in 45 minute periods (Usma, 2015, p. 105), they also report using these hours to engage in a myriad of activities such as sports events, meetings, students' rehearsals, and even community events (p. 106). In the second study, the majority of the institutions (78%) claimed to study only one hour of English per week, and a small percentage (22%) claimed to study two hours a week (Bastidas and Muñoz-Ibarra, 2011, p. 99). However, according to the participating teachers, in reality students would go for weeks without having an English class since they did not feel comfortable with the "new" responsibility the government has entrusted them, and therefore, they used this time to reinforce knowledge of other subjects, such as mathematics (p. 99).

**Students' lack of motivation to learn English.** This was found in most of the studies conducted in the state of Antioquia, in the cities of Medellín, Cali, and Pasto, and in rural areas of Colombia. In the study conducted by González et al. (2001) in the city of Medellín, for example, teachers reported that most of their students came from underprivileged neighborhoods, and they had to study and work to help support their families. Therefore, instead of picturing themselves travelling and going to college in the near future, they saw themselves looking for jobs. Consequently, they were not interested in learning English.

Eight years later in the studies conducted by Correa et al. (2014) in Antioquia and Usma (2015) in Medellín, teachers reported having similar problems with their students. However, this time the reasons for the lack of motivation towards the language were a lot more tragic. These students could not gather sufficient motivation to learn English because they suffered from poverty; family violence; parent unemployment; teenage pregnancy; and the ever-increasing rates in prostitution and street violence brought about by forced migration, drug addiction and minor drug trafficking, among others (Correa et al. 2014, Usma, 2015).

Studies conducted in urban Cali and rural areas of Colombia depict a similar situation in regards to student motivation towards English. Yet, the reasons for this seem to be less tragic. In the study in Cali, for example, these seemed to lie in the facts that students did not consider leaning a foreign language as important, that they did not have clear professional goals, and that many of them lacked parent support (Hernández & Faustino, 2006). Meanwhile, in the study in rural Colombia, the reason for students' lack of motivation seemed to be that instead of considering learning a foreign language as a necessity they saw this as a threat to the preservation of their traditions and their culture (Bonilla & Cruz-Arcila, 2014).

In sum, the Colombian government assumed that by making the teaching and learning of English mandatory and aligning the national tests to this requirement, teachers would find a way to raise their own level of English and that of their students. It did not seem to realize that for this objective to be reached, it would need to not only provide teachers with appropriate subject matter preparation but also modify the poor material and legislative conditions that affected most public schools in Colombia, especially those in rural areas.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Since the 1990s, the Colombian government has been promoting the teaching of English from primary school in the hope that this will ensure high levels of English by the end of secondary school, and make Colombian citizens more competitive in the global market. To achieve this objective, it has launched a series of programs that have focused on different aspects and have evolved through time. These programs have all been very similar in their objectives, and the mechanisms they have devised to solve the problem as conceived by the government: the low level of English proficiency of public school teachers and students. Yet, they have not been able to solve it. Nor have they been able to address the myriad professional and work related challenges that public primary school teachers have faced in trying to implement the mechanisms.

The solution to this conundrum would seem quite obvious: to hire English licensed teachers for primary schools and pay them fair wages to incentivize them to stay; to design PD programs that have coverage, articulation, continuity, and appropriate contents; to provide teachers with sufficient physical and technological resources, smaller classes, and more time of instruction, and so on. Nonetheless, it is our belief that neither the increase in the English proficiency level of Colombian citizens nor the insertion of the country into the global market is going to happen by the mere implementation of these actions. More profound changes need to occur for this to happen. These changes have to do with switches in the way the government views not only language policymaking but also English, other foreign and indigenous languages, and foreign language learning and teaching in Colombia.

First, as pointed out by Correa and Usma (2013) citing Bentley (2010) and Heck (2004), the Colombian government seems to have adopted a bureaucratic or rationalist view of language policymaking in which measures top down, without taking into account the opinions of those people in charge of implementing the policy, such as teachers and teacher educators. Also, it has taken them based on the acceptance of foreign texts and discourses that do not take into account historical facts or the local context and expertise. Besides, it has implemented them without proper verification of the existence of enough resources and adequate external conditions. Moreover, it has over-relied on standardizing measures of performance and employed accountability systems that are inefficient and do not offer a reliable picture of the efficacy of the measures.

To more effectively achieve its objectives, the Colombian government would need to adopt a more critical sociocultural view of language policymaking (Levinson et al., 2009) that allows it to design its policies based on local needs, taking into account contextual and historical factors, with the agreement of all stakeholders, using local knowledge and expertise, using responsive materials, and employing accountability measures that go beyond standardizing tests. Until it does this, it is going to continue issuing laws and programs that will not be more than “good intentions on paper” (Shohamy, 2006).

Second, the Colombian government seems to be holding a skewed view of English and of other foreign and native languages. In terms of the first, the government has been selling Colombian citizens the idea of English as the panacea, the tool that will guarantee them access to socio-economic goods and social mobility (NME, 2005b). Such view of English is not only a fallacy but also a stumbling-block in the achievement of government goals of insertion into the global market. To begin with, as several Colombian scholars have stated, access to jobs in Colombia rarely require proficiency in English (Herazo, Jeréz & Lorduy, 2012). In fact, Guerrero (2010a) mentions that in Colombia “most new jobs will be found in the service sector where high levels of education are not needed and will be characterized by being low-paid, part time, or temporary” (p. 44). Additionally, as Luke (1996) clarifies, social mobility does not depend only on proficiency in the language of power

but on many other factors such as the economic, social, and cultural capital of the citizens. Besides, as the OECD (2012a) remarks, what has stopped Colombia from insertion into the global market is not its citizens' low level of proficiency in English. It is the multiple socio-economic problems that have affected the country for years, such as its elevated levels of inequity and of internal displacement caused by long-lasting domestic conflict with armed groups, to mention only a few of the problems the country faces.

Therefore, to have a better chance of inserting the country into the global market, the Colombian government would also need to understand that, as useful as learning English might be for some of its citizens, what is going to ensure their access and social mobility not only increasing the levels of English of its citizens. It is procuring solutions to the aforementioned and other heartfelt problems that the country is experiencing and creating the conditions that allow its citizens to learn both English and other foreign and native languages, and to cultivate the languages they already speak. It is also promoting the development of not just cultural but other types of capital.

Third, by switching the focus from foreign languages to English only, a change that was evident in the Bilingualism Law, the Quality Guidelines for Teacher Preparation Programs, and the name of the latest national policy, the government seems to have taken the position that other languages are an obstacle to the mastery of English. Such position goes against second language acquisition theories, which for years have called people's attention on the fact that students are capable of learning various languages at once (Grosjean, 2010); and that, in fact, being able to speak a second language facilitates the learning of a third or fourth language (Odlin, 1989). The position also runs counter UNESCO's (2003) guidelines to member states, which are to see "multilingualism more as a way of life than a problem to be solved" (p. 12) and "to make mother tongue instruction possible while providing at the same time the acquisition of languages used in larger areas of the country and the world" (p. 18).

Hence, besides modifying its position in regards to English, the Colombian government would also need to modify its position in regards to foreign and native languages in the country to one that recognizes that those languages are not an obstacle but an asset that only adds to people's cultural capital. Until it does this, it is going to continue undermining the value of other foreign and native languages spoken in the country, trying to erase them from the school and university language curriculum, and promoting bilingualism in Spanish-English as the formula that everyone needs to adopt, regardless of the languages they already can or want to speak.

Fourth, the government seems to have assumed a very myopic view of what it means to learn a foreign language. In this view, teachers can learn English by, for example, taking one or two scattered, discontinuous, and disarticulated courses offered by people with no preparation in teaching languages by means of decontextualized materials. Similarly, students can learn it in two hours of instruction a week, with 40 or more peers in the classroom, and with only chalk and board as resources. Besides, they can learn it in a vacuum, being affected only by the level of English of their teachers, not by the multiple serious socio-economic and political problems going on in their lives.

Such views of foreign language learning defy traditional second language acquisition (SLA) theories, which stipulate that to learn a language students need sufficient time of instruction. According to statements made by the same NME, this would be "an average of eight years of teaching, with five to eight hours a week, from 8 years of age" (NME, 2005b), not three hours a week, from ninth grade, as is now being demanded by Bilingual Colombia. Moreover, the views contradict SLA theories which dictate that learning of a foreign language occurs more easily when teachers have small class size groups, which allow them to provide individualized instruction, have group activities, and more easily manage behavior (Vandenberg, 2012). Besides, the views negate

SLA theories which affirm that teachers need proper instructional materials that “allow students to interact with words, images, and ideas in ways that develop their abilities in multiple literacies such as reading, listening, viewing, thinking, speaking, writing, and technology” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014). Finally, the views deny recent ecological perspectives on language learning. Under these perspectives, language learning is essentially contextualized. It is connected to school and society realities (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) and acts as an ecosystem where identities and other languages to which the learner has access exert a major influence in learning (Van Lier, 2004). On the other hand, its teaching is tightly related to the uses of the language, which are determined by communication needs (Kramsch and Steffensen, 2007; Van Lier, 2004).

Thereby, to be more successful in its promotion of English in public schools, the Colombian government would need to fully grasp these basic facts about SLA. Until it does, it is not going to operate the changes that are needed in these settings: the hiring of English licensed teachers for primary school, the allocation of sufficient and adequate resources, the smaller classes, the sufficient time of instruction, to mention only a few of the modifications needed. What is worse, it is not going to make any effort to solve the multiple problems affecting students’ lives, such as violence, poverty, drug addiction, and prostitution (González, 2007; Guerrero, 2010b; Usma, 2009a; Valencia, 2013). Finally, it is not going to address the substantial differences that were shown in the studies above between rural and urban areas in Colombia (Cárdenas & Hernández, 2011), or the ever increasing gap that were discussed between the public and private sectors (Correa & Usma, 2013, Usma, 2009).

Finally, the government has demonstrated a very limited view of what it implies to teach English in Colombia. In this view all that is required to teach English to children is some words and expressions, as shown in the national standards, as well as some class activities and games. This is why it has not deemed it important to offer more than a few faulty language and methodology courses to teachers. Besides, in this view anyone who knows the language can teach how to teach it. This is why it has considered acceptable to hire foreign companies or local institutions with no experience in teacher preparation to carry out PD programs, instead of local institutions with trajectory in teacher education (González, 2007). Finally, in this view teaching English in Colombia is the same as teaching it in Europe. This is why it has estimated that it is beneficial to use imported standards, textbooks, and training packages to increase the levels of English in Colombia (Correa & Usma, 2013).

Thus, to more effectively support primary school teachers for the new task of teaching English, the government would need to realize that knowledge of a few words in the other language does not qualify anyone to teach the language and neither does having a good command of the language. Teachers need both an extensive knowledge of the subject matter and knowledge of how to teach that subject matter (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Besides, the government must understand that teaching English in Colombia is not the same as teaching English in Europe. As such, it cannot simply transpose curriculum, materials, teaching models, and even native speakers of English into the Colombian context and pretend that this will be enough to raise the English proficiency levels of its population. Until the government fully comprehends this, it is going to continue to offer only a few scattered courses to primary school teachers, hiring the wrong corporations for their development, and using foreign models and materials that do not really address local needs.

In sum, as Correa & Usma (2013) proposed, the Colombian government needs to take a step back and switch paradigms. Otherwise, it is going to continue to replicate the same mistakes over and over, expecting different results. In addition, it is going to continue to blame public school teachers in general, and primary school teachers in particular, for the lack of English proficiency of their students, instead of taking care of all the other factors that might be affecting students’ learning

of the foreign language. Only when English in primary public education is analyzed within a wider critical socio-cultural framework that respects localness, will quality of English instruction in Colombia be likely to improve and will public primary school teachers be able to overcome the numerous challenges we have described in this article.

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